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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 LISBON 001672

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TAGS: [SCUL](#) [PGOV](#) [PO](#)
SUBJECT: PORTUGUESE EDUCATION: FROM SALAZAR TO SOCRATES

Classified By: Matt Harrington, Pol/Econ Counselor, State Department
Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

SUMMARY

¶1. (U) Even more than thirty years after the Salazar dictatorship, Portugal's education system lags so far behind other EU countries that its economic progress has been significantly affected. High dropout rates and lack of resulting qualifications have meant lost growth potential for the Portuguese economy. The Socrates Administration has proposed and implemented many reforms, some of them contentious, to address these problems, and anticipates that the Portuguese education system and economy will be competitive with most EU members within the next 20 years. End summary.

AN ALARMING DROPOUT RATE

¶2. (U) In 1974, when a military coup brought down the dictatorship in then-agrarian Portugal, 40% of Portuguese were functionally illiterate. Formal education was discouraged under Salazar, and the state encouraged technical and agricultural training. Although Portuguese education has improved significantly in the past 30 years, the country's pre-1974 legacy is reflected in shockingly low graduation rates. According to the OECD's "Economic Survey of Portugal 2006," only 25% of Portuguese ages 25-34 have completed secondary education - well behind all other EU nations except Malta. (NOTE: The U.S. graduation rate is nearly 85%.) In Portugal, mandatory basic education lasts nine years, after which the education system splits into different tracks: students may drop out, engage in technical/vocational training, or continue towards higher education.

THE PLAN FOR EDUCATION REFORM

¶4. (U) The Portuguese government developed a plan that lays out five broad objectives for education, as follows:

- Extend traditional and vocational/technical education to all children under 18, including those who have left school;
- Progressively expand pre-school education so that all children have access;
- Structure adult education and training programs to respond to the specific needs of working adults without the equivalent of the basic 9-year education;
- Make the school system more accessible and more accountable to students and their families, while making recruitment and placement of teachers, hours of operation for schools, and the structuring of their services, more aligned

with the needs of students and their parents/guardians; and
-- Implement a culture and practice of evaluation and responsibility, via national standardized tests measuring student performance, evaluation of teachers, and evaluation of schools.

SOLUTIONS FOR A NEW ECONOMY

15. (U) The GOP is putting other academic measures in place with hopes of making Portugal's economy more competitive; namely, by preparing the future workforce in English, science, technology, and math. The GOP has made English compulsory starting in 3rd grade, and will make introductory courses in English available for 1st and 2nd graders after school. In addition, Luis Capucha, the Ministry of Education's Director-General for Innovation and Curricular Development, noted that all of the nation's schools now have computer access, enabling Portuguese youth to gain skills essential for an "information society" - a goal that PM Socrates identified as an administration priority. The GOP also launched a new campaign to improve math scores after Portuguese students ranked second to last among EU nations on the PISA international test, and is working on a plan to integrate experimental science training throughout schooling for all students.

16. (SBU) In addition, the GOP is in the planning stages of a campaign to improve student perception of technical and vocational training. Capucha noted that a lack of interest stemming from poor student opinion of training programs, rather than a lack of access, has limited the scope and participation in specialized education. Due to the complete

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separation between secondary education programs, technical and vocational training are seen as "second-class" offerings by many Portuguese high school students. Both Capucha and Manuel Grilo from the National Federation of Teachers (FENPROF) stressed that increased participation in technical and vocational programs would help alleviate unemployment by giving otherwise potential dropouts marketable skills, and make for a more flexible workforce, thereby benefiting Portugal's economy.

REFORM OF TEACHING CAREERS

17. (U) In addition to the five reforms targeting students, the GOP also recently introduced a plan to change teaching careers by revamping teacher evaluation, restructuring the promotion system, and lengthening working hours. Many teachers have denounced the reforms, causing considerable tension between teachers and their superiors in the Ministry of Education. Pol/EconOff interviewed Jose Rodrigues, a senior teacher close to the Embassy, who believes the proposed changes are little more than a cost-saving measure. Rodrigues claimed the GOP wants to force teachers out of the system by denying them career progression. Reducing the number of career grades and basing promotion on evaluation rather than seniority, while simultaneously increasing teachers' responsibilities and limiting lesson preparation and professional development, serves to encourage teachers to retire, according to Rodrigues.

18. (U) Education Minister Maria de Lurdes Rodrigues publicly blamed teachers for Portugal's high dropout rates and poor showings on international tests, and accused teachers of caring only about their positions rather than the progress of their students. In response, educators' unions organized a one-day national strike and have criticized both the Minister and the Ministry's reform package in local media. Portugal's Green Party and various teacher unions have called for Rodrigues's resignation. One teacher reported that

Minister Rodrigues's style has created an "atmosphere of war" between teachers and the Ministry.

COMMENT

19. (C) The GOP's proposed reforms will help integrate the educational ethos into Portuguese society by expanding the years and hours of education for Portugal's youth and adult workers. The expectations of improvement in 20 years depend on the present generation of children still in primary school, which will be the first with working class parents who value education and for whom quality education is widely available. Minister Rodrigues's drive to reform the education system must be commended, and in a meeting with the Ambassador, Minister for the Presidency Pedro Silva Pereira shared his opinion that Rodrigues is the most effective Education Minister with whom he has worked. However, an opinion poll released on July 28 revealed a public approval rating of only 20% for the Minister - the result of a recent fiasco regarding physics and chemistry exit exams. Additionally, Rodrigues's abrasive tone towards educators and open distaste for the nation's teaching corps diminishes her effectiveness in implementing much-needed reforms.
O'Neal